

VZCZCXRO5376
PP RUEHAG
DE RUEHCV #2990/01 2722137
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 292137Z SEP 06
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6528
INFO RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0547
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002990

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPT PASS TO AID/OTI RPORTER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/10/2031
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: MINERS MASSACRED; MILITARY IMPLICATED

CARACAS 00002990 001.3 OF 002

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

1. (C) SUMMARY. Military forces killed at least six miners in the La Paragua area of Bolivar state on September 22. The killings quickly elevated to a massacre in the public eye, and the number of killed miners could be as high as two dozen. Defense Minister Baduel's initial reaction was to defend the soldiers of the Fifth Theater of Operations, although President Chavez and Minister of Justice Chacon subsequently acknowledged an excessive use of force on the soldiers' part. The motive for the killings remains unclear, with speculation rampant that elements within the government ordered the strike to protect its own illicit mining interests. Reports that some of the victims were Brazilian may also complicate the Venezuela-Brazil relationship. END SUMMARY

THIS IS WHY THEY NEED MORE CHOPPERS

2. (U) On September 22, military forces of the Fifth Theater of Operations opened fire on a group of miners in the La Paragua area of Bolivar state, killing at least six miners. Defense Minister Baduel defended the military's action, saying there was an operation to confiscate arms and destroy machinery used to illegally extract precious minerals. Baduel, however, denied that fire came from a military helicopter. Other military leaders from the region have acknowledged that there were helicopters in the area, but they were conducting observation and evaluation missions. Two of the victims were reportedly Brazilian nationals, and press reports indicate that Brasilia directed its embassy in Caracas to request "detailed information" from the BRV about the killings.

CHAVEZ: EXCESSIVE FORCE

3. (U) The La Paragua story dominated news cycles in ensuing days. The fallout from the story and lack of spin control even forced President Chavez to directly criticize the military. Chavez acknowledged that, "in the least, there was an excessive use of force," by a group of soldiers. Chavez emphasized that the full weight of the law would fall on any abuser of state weaponry. Minister of Interior and

Justice Jesse Chacon echoed Chavez's words, saying that at a minimum, soldiers of the Armed Forces used excessive force. Press reports indicate fourteen soldiers are involved in the shootings and will be detained on September 29.

"BIG FISHES" RESPONSIBLE?

14. (C) Opposition candidate Manuel Rosales holds the "big fishes" in the government responsible for the incident. Rosales claims they maintain interests in the illegal extraction of gold and diamonds - interests that were being threatened. Rosales's statements are consistent with the speculation of former Bolivar governor Andres Velasquez that the government was trying to horn out competitors for illicit gold and diamonds. Adding fuel to press speculation of this theory, Strategic Commander of the Armed Forces Wilfredo Silva appeared before the National Assembly September 28, asking for legislation allowing the Armed Forces to shoot down aircraft believed to be involved in illicit activity. Silva argued that if a military pilot shoots down a plane engaging in illicit activity, that pilot has no legal protection for his act. Such a law, argued Silva, would increase the degree of vigilance with which the Venezuelan Armed Forces can protect Venezuelan territory. Silva added that the lands of Bolivar, where the miners were killed, hold enough gold to pay off the foreign debts of every country from Mexico to Argentina and the Caribbean. Such legislation would also allow the Venezuelan Armed Forces to better protect against illegal miners in this area.

COMMENT

CARACAS 00002990 002.3 OF 002

15. (C) The failure of the government to spin this story in their favor is remarkable. The Ministry of Defense's bungling of this matter - including the poorly-timed request for legal protection to shoot down airplanes so soon after the killing of these miners - leads to, at best, charges of ineptitude. That President Chavez publicly disavowed his military, something rarely seen, shows a real concern on his part about how this incident may play out on the electoral stage.

BROWNFIELD